

## WAITING AT THE GATES

Official short story by Atarashi Yasumi

Translation by [kastellaran.tumblr.com](http://kastellaran.tumblr.com)

The *Hiroshikiban*. A day in the life of the men who guarded the *Ooku* was long indeed. In the fifth hour<sup>1</sup> of the morning, the *Nanatsuguchi*<sup>2</sup>, the gate used by the ladies of the *Ooku*, would be opened, and in the seventh hour of the evening it would be closed. All the while, the *Hiroshikiban* would have to monitor the procession of merchants and visitors to the *Ooku*, and keep track of all the comings and goings of the ladies who had business outside the castle. And if anyone started to think *the gates are finally closed*, they would of course have the night shift, meaning they'd have to stand guard all night. On top of all that, the endless stream of gifts and requests for the *Ooku* were held at the *Nanatsuguchi*, and the checking and transportation of those items also fell under the jurisdiction of the *Hiroshikiban*. It was only in the short time between completing their morning routines and the opening of the gates that they would get a moment's rest.

One man among the *Hiroshikiban*, Kimura, had been chosen to oversee the daily training. He would check their posture and sword forms, and sometimes even run carrying pails of water on his back without being asked. It was simply a matter of pride as one who had been entrusted with the security of the *Hiroshikiban* for so many years. He would stand in front of the gate all day, ready to leap into action if anything were to occur. Self-training was just another part of his responsibilities to the *Ooku*, he thought.

In the hour before the outer gates were to be opened, there was of course no one in front of the *Nanatsuguchi*. Kimura would breathe in deeply the still morning air and practice his cuts, feeling his body slowly warm up. For him, there was simply no feeling better than this.

Lately though, Kimura's mornings had begun to change. Not too far from where he stood, two young *Hiroshikiban* had been coming to train.

Their names were Sudou and Asanuma. It had not been long since they had arrived at the *Nanatsuguchi*, and normally they would be guarding the inner gates which lead to the *Nagatsubonemuki*, where the ladies of the *Ooku* lived. Their training sessions here had suddenly begun a few days ago.

To be frank, Kimura could see that they were struggling, but there was nothing to be done about it.

---

<sup>1</sup> During this period, the day was divided into twelve hours rather than our twenty-four, with each hour equalling roughly two of ours as a result. The length of an hour changed throughout the year, but the fifth hour of the morning corresponded roughly to a period from 07:00-09:00, and the seventh hour of the evening to a period from 15:00-17:00.

<sup>2</sup> The name *Nanatsuguchi* seems to mean something like "the seventh entrance," or "seven entrances," but this gate is actually named for the hour at which it closes—the seventh hour.

He hadn't intended to be noticed, but the two sensed his gaze from behind.. He could have overlooked their floundering if it had only lasted a day or two, but they appeared again today, sullenly swinging their swords off to the side. Kimura let out a sigh and approached the pair.

“What are you doing?”

Immediately the two stopped and bowed. “Good morning, Kimura-dono! We’re practicing!” Asanuma cheerfully replied. He was short but sturdy, and his cuts were the same. He probably had some talent from the start.

“...Did we disturb you?” Sudou added modestly. Compared to Asanuma, he was slender and frail. He was always reading in the guardhouse, and so did not stand out among the other *Hiroshikiban* in martial prowess. In fact, it was clear from his training that he was still lacking.

“Did you two lose a bet with the other newbies?”

Asanuma shook his head frantically. “Not at all! We decided to do this ourselves!”

“It’s true. We wanted to become strong like you, Kimura-dono,” Sudou continued.

“Well, that’s awfully sudden..”

“It’s—”

“The *mononoke*!” Asanuma shouted, paying no mind to Sudou’s hesitation, before catching himself with an “Ah!”

The commotion that had happened in the *Nagatsubonemuki* during the *Oomochihiki* festival, not more than a fortnight ago. A number of the *Ooku*’s ladies had died at the hands of what was said to be a *mononoke*. Kimura himself had not seen it, but many others—Sudou and Asanuma clearly, as well as the veteran Sakashita—claimed to have come face to face with it. Some of the *Hiroshikiban* could not believe this story, so naturally people had come to avoid mentioning the very word “*mononoke*.”

Sudou glared at Asanuma, but eventually brought his attention back to Kimura and muttered “We were completely useless against it. We couldn’t do anything but rely on an outsider.”

“That...medicine seller, was it?” Even Kimura struggled for the right words to say to Sudou, whose head was hung in shame. During the chaos a fortnight ago, a strange medicine seller had appeared out of nowhere. The man completely ignored the authority of the *Hiroshikiban* and broke into the *Nagatsubonemuki*, saying he would exorcise the *mononoke*. He really had quelled the commotion, but no one really knew how he had done it; and afterwards, he had

vanished. Even now, when Kimura recalled the man, he had the feeling they had been caught by a *kitsune*.

“That...was no ordinary man.”

“He seemed that way even to you, Kimura-dono?”

“He did.”

“If we had only been more capable—”

“You shouldn’t aspire to be like him.”

The two fell silent.

“Don’t ever think you can become like him. It would be like jumping into the sky to become a bird.” As soon as he said that, Sudou and Asanuma’s shoulders slumped in despair. Kimura found himself laughing at the sudden drop.

“...But, well, don’t give up on your training. Throw yourself into it. If it’s alright, let me take a look.” The pair’s mood instantly shifted, their faces brightening. Kimura found himself once again laughing at the sudden change.

So, Kimura briefly joined their practice session. Asanuma’s form had improved drastically, but Sudou still did not give up. *I see your determination to become stronger was not just talk.* When practice was over, Sudou and Asanuma were both dripping with sweat. They drenched a rag in the well and wiped their faces. As he watched them, Kimura suddenly asked, “Why me though? You could ask Sakashita-dono to teach you. That man is a master of *iai*<sup>3</sup>. He even participates in official duels.”

Asanuma grimaced. “He won’t help us, no matter what we try. He’s probably just being humble. Have you ever sparred with him, Kimura-dono?”

“No... but I have seen his skill for myself.” Sudou and Asanuma suddenly leaned in, their interest piqued. It was a well known story among the *Hiroshikiban*, but they had apparently not yet heard it. “It was a long time ago. Both Sakashita-dono and I were still young. A lady of the *Ooku* went out to visit a shrine when she encountered a strange man. She only intended to talk with him for a bit, but...well, you know. In any case, when she tried to escape, he pursued her. I made to stop him, but... my opponent was a teacher of *kenjutsu*. It’s shameful, but I was no match for him. This scar is from that encounter.” Kimura pointed at the scar across his left eye. Fortunately, his eye had been spared, but he remembered that in that moment he had been fully prepared to die. When his face had been cut he fell backwards, and

---

<sup>3</sup> The art of unsheathing one’s sword and striking quickly in a specific way, as practiced in *iaido* or *iaijutsu*.

his opponent wasted no time and readied to strike again. Then, in an instant, blood sprayed out from the man's neck. Sakashita had run up and defeated him in one strike. "...I said I had seen it, but it was too fast for my eyes," he murmured, lost in the memory.

Asanuma looked at him skeptically. "*Sakashita-dono* did that...?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you... but Sakashita-dono is always being made fun of by the ladies of the *Ooku*."

"Well, he used to fight quite a bit with the merchants, didn't he..."

"Really!?"

"People change. That was long ago now..." Kimura was about to go on, but just then the very person they had been discussing appeared. Sakashita approached them, suspicious.

"What's all this ruckus this early in the morning?"

"Kimura-dono was helping us with our training," Sudou replied.

"...Is that true?" Sakashita seemed surprised.

"It's true!" Asanuma insisted. "Sakashita, don't be humble, please teach us! Teach us the secret so we can be as strong as that medicine-"

"Where did you hear about that...?" Sakashita became unsteady, and Kimura immediately chimed in.

"That's right, Sakashita-dono, give it up already. Why don't you tell us why that man's strength surpasses all others in your eyes?"

"*Oi*, Kimura..." Sakashita glared at him, but in the end he could not withstand the expectant gazes of Sudou and Asanuma. He let out a long sigh and spoke. "...There's a difference in resolve. When he unsheathes his sword, he's resolved to do nothing short of cutting down his opponent. To cut your opponent means taking on everything that comes with it. Normally, a person cannot do that. It's a heavy thing. On the other hand, if you can't accept it, your resolve will be half-formed, and your blade will dull. If you want to be strong, you must always have the resolve to take on everything. That's no small feat."

Sudou, Asanuma, and even Kimura were all taken aback. Even though he had asked him, Kimura didn't really expect Sakashita to answer sincerely.

Or perhaps he had been wondering whether Sakashita really was that strong this whole time.

“I knew it!” Asanuma muttered all of a sudden. “Sakashita-dono, you really do regard that medicine seller highly!”

“Wha—That’s not what I’m saying! I’m just stating fa—” The sound of the *taiko* resounded five times. “It’s already time to open the gates! Enough with this meaningless gossip!” Sakashita’s voice boomed, putting an end to their morning practice.

Kimura opened the outer gates of the *Nanatsuguchi*, and stood in front in the same place as always. In the quiet early morning, when there was not yet any sign of visitors, Kimura suddenly found himself wondering if that strangely dressed man with the large trunk wouldn’t appear again.

*I guess we’re not so different.*

The *Hiroshikiban*— the men who protected the *Ooku*, were waiting for that strange man. But back then, they still had no idea what would happen within the *Ooku*.